

Anarchism as non-integration

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I want to propose a way of thinking about anarchism as a historical movement, which I haven't seen expressed before in this way. Put simply: anarchism was the movement and imaginary that opposed the national integration of the working classes.

In 1988 Marcel van der Linden published an article titled 'The National Integration of the European Working Classes 1871–1914', which is foundational to this perspective. It posits some of the key factors in the process by which working class people and their organisations came to identify their interests with those of the nation state.

Anarchism emerged as a current within the socialist movement at the beginning of the period covered by van der Linden's article; its chief characteristic was its opposition to formal political participation. At that time, capitalism was not a completed project. By actively opposing political participation, anarchism during 1870–1914 was able to resist much more effectively than its Marxist opponents the process through which capitalism extended its domination. This process has been identified as the movement from the formal to the real subsumption of capital, described in Marx's 'lost sixth chapter' of *Capital*. The most salient aspect of this process for our purposes was that described by van der Linden: the national integration of the working classes. Loren Goldner describes this as a shift in capitalist societies from viewing workers as 'a pariah class' to 'the community of labour'.

There were many different components to this national integration: education, formalisation of language, communications, imperialism, racism and the spread of 'whiteness' etc. Working-class representation in parliaments and large, tolerated trade unions were only one element. But by rejecting this element, anarchism opened up the possibility of capitalist modernity remaining an incomplete project, defeated by an alternative world oriented around the commune. The majority of Marxists, meanwhile, were happy to march in lockstep with capitalist progress.

Rather than bring the working class into the fold of capitalist modernity – the historic role of social democracy in Germany – in other countries attempting to get on the train of industrial development, anarchism was able to articulate a political project of the pariah classes (workers and peasants). The requirement for socialists to do this was grappled with by Marxists in analogous situations in places like Italy and Russia but the ideological adherence to the progress of history sat uneasily with the requirement to fight for a better world in the here and now. This is what anarchists were able to do, projecting an alternative modernity that could be brought about by a combination of direct action and education.

The greatest achievement of that project was the Spanish revolution, an event that was possible because the national integration of the working class had not taken place in that country. There was no comprehensive schooling system, pre-capitalist agricultural forms continued to predominate in swathes of the country, there was a good deal of differentiation across the territory in terms of economy, culture, language, communications and so forth. To this can be added the absence of national prestige – identified by van der Linden as a further important factor in national integration – following the so-called ‘disaster’ of 1898 when Spain lost control of Cuba and the Philippines. Furthermore, Spanish neutrality in World War One meant that the issue of working-class integration was not forced by total war and conscription. The result was that, well into the twentieth century, there was no ambiguity about the continuing pariah status of the working class in Spain.

This prompts an interesting chicken and egg question as to whether anarchism thrived in or created such conditions. On the one hand, where national integration took place very early, as in England, anarchism was condemned from the get-go to a marginal and rearguard role, occupied chiefly with the noble task of combatting popular jingoism. So, in that sense, anarchism could perhaps only thrive where national integration hadn’t occurred. On the other hand, where anarchism did thrive it was a bulwark against integration in the sense that it opposed both the formal political parties and large bureaucratic trade unions that led the process of national integration in, for example, Germany. So, the existence of large anarchist movements militated against national integration taking place.

As such, anarchism can be added to the constellation of circumstantial and long-term structural reasons for non-integration in Spain by the time of the civil war. In those circumstances, the movement was able to present a plausible alternative articulation of modernity to its constituents. This was necessary because, in a context in which non-integration remained pending, modernity as such was not regarded as a completed project either by the range of left-wing, right-wing and liberal alternatives to anarchism or by anarchists themselves. The right wished to solve the problem of national integration through coercion and annihilation of recalcitrant elements, the left through secular education and the state mediation of labour disputes.

In some respects, the anarchist articulation of modernity in Spain was compatible with a project of working-class integration, particularly if we analyse specific individual theorists or particular ideological defects, but taken as a whole it would be hard to make this case. Anarchism in Spain differentiated itself from competing ideologies and sustained itself as a movement through both a clearly articulated and uncompromising class consciousness and the fiercely guarded independence of autonomous union sections, affinity groups and publications. During the civil war, however, the movement was split by the question of collaboration with the state.

The struggle over the question of state collaboration could be usefully framed as a struggle against the national integration of the working class. By waging the struggle on a broad scale, and by constructing and defending what, at least to its partisans, was a plausible alternative outcome, anarchists in Spain fulfilled what we can retrospectively posit as the destiny of anarchism as the movement of working-class non-integration.

What do we gain from thinking about anarchism in this way? Firstly, we have a plausible account of its enormous appeal and validity among workers and peasants in the decades following 1871, while also appreciating why that appeal was temporally and geographically constricted. Positing anarchism as the projected alternative to a specific and crucial period of capitalist transition also gets beyond both transhistorical appeals to the struggle between liberty and authority,

and false dichotomies of primitive and modern social movements. Lastly, this perspective means we can account for and take seriously anarchism's defeat, and start to think about what that has meant for anarchism and the world in subsequent decades, and what can be salvaged from a project of non-integration after integration has been largely accomplished.

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The following piece is an attempt to write up some ideas expressed at a talk about my book hosted last week by Robert Kramm and team's Radical History book talk series, and also in conversation with Jim about Loren Goldner's *Revolution, Defeat and Theoretical Underdevelopment: Russia, Turkey, Spain, Bolivia*, the subject of our next podcast. Many thanks to both parties for these enjoyable and fruitful conversations.

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